

5 Understanding learner autonomy through MOOC-supported blended learning environments: an investigation into Chinese MA ELT students' beliefs

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Abstract

This short paper attempts to investigate how the FutureLearn² Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) blend, integrated into the module Theories, Methods, and Approaches of Language Learning and Teaching on the Master of Arts (MA) in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics at Coventry University, affected Chinese MA students' perceptions of learner autonomy and their teaching practice. The findings are supported by the data collected from an online survey, individual semi-structured interviews, and Video Stimulated Recall (VSR) interviews based on microteaching practices carried out by participants for the module Teaching English in Higher Education. The study identified a gap between experienced teachers' theoretical beliefs on learner autonomy and their microteaching practice, which could be influenced by their prior teaching experience in the traditional teacher-centred Chinese educational context.

Keywords: learner autonomy, beliefs, practice, MOOC-supported blended learning environment, chinese ELT students.

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1. Introduction

The shift from teacher-centred to student-centred teaching could motivate learners to take more responsibility for their learning process and embrace their new identity as autonomous learners. [Benson \(2006\)](#) reports on various studies illustrating that learner autonomy has a significant role to play in successful foreign language learning. However, in some traditional teacher-centred learning cultures, the learner responsibility has been suppressed or ignored ([Armstrong, 2012](#), p. 2426). [Littlewood \(1999\)](#) argues that there are different degrees of autonomy, such as a higher level of autonomy (i.e. proactive autonomy) and a lower level of autonomy (i.e. reactive autonomy).

Proactive autonomy refers to the kind of autonomy which is generally mentioned in Western learning cultures, where learners are often encouraged to take control of their own learning process ([Littlewood, 1999](#), p. 75). On the other hand, reactive autonomy “does not create its own directions but, once a direction has been initiated, it enables learners to organise their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal” ([Littlewood 1999](#), p. 75), which is discussed in East Asian learning cultures.

Furthermore, [Littlewood \(1999, cited in Gieve & Clark, 2005, p. 262\)](#) points out that traditional “Confucian attitudes to learning and teaching” have resulted in the teacher-centred class in China where teachers are generally the primary source of knowledge. Therefore, there could be a mismatch between Chinese English Language Teaching (ELT) students’ perceptions of learner autonomy (i.e. reactive autonomy) and the generally recognised notion of learner autonomy (i.e. proactive autonomy) in Western educational cultures.

These reflections have emerged from the “apparent differences between British and Chinese cultures of learning” ([Jin & Cortazzi, 1993, 1996, cited in Gieve & Clark, 2005, p. 2](#)). It is argued here that the mismatch in the understanding of the concept of learner autonomy between Western and Eastern learning cultures means that Chinese students studying this concept in the UK while engaging in teacher education find it ‘troublesome’ ([Meyer & Land, 2003](#)). [Orsini-Jones](#)

(2015) discusses the complexities of the concept of learner autonomy for students engaging in teacher education and suggests that it could be a “threshold concept”. Threshold Concepts (TCs) (Meyer & Land, 2003) challenge the belief system of learners. They are concepts of fundamental importance in a subject which, if understood, can open new learning horizons and help to grasp other related troublesome knowledge. The encounter with a TC can lead to a state of “liminality”, i.e. the oscillation between grasping the concept and the feeling that it is out of reach (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. 22). Crossing the TC allows learners to access “a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. 3), which results in an ontological (transformation affecting the “being”) and epistemological (transformation at the level of knowledge and language) shift.

Gieve and Clark (2005) argue that it is possible for students from traditional learning cultures to become autonomous learners, as long as they are exposed to autonomy-supportive environments. The adoption of blended learning could be an effective approach to providing Chinese ELT learners with autonomy-supportive environments. According to Orsini-Jones (2015), blending a FutureLearn MOOC into the formal curriculum could assist international students to manage the above-mentioned troublesome knowledge and develop their autonomy. In the study reported here, the FutureLearn MOOC *Exploring the World of English Language Teaching* was blended into the formal curriculum of the MA in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistic (ELTAL) at Coventry University. Students were invited to engage in reflective practice on their beliefs as teachers while doing the MOOC. They engaged in weekly reflections on how engaging with ELT topics online was affecting their understanding of both learner and teacher autonomy and of how new technologies could be integrated into the ELT learning process.

This study aims to investigate how the MOOC blend implemented on the MA in ELT and Applied Linguistics at Coventry University influences Chinese ELT students’ beliefs on learner autonomy and whether or not such theoretical beliefs are applied in practice when delivering the assessed micro-teaching task for the MA.

2. Methodology

This study was carried out according to the ethics procedures at Coventry University, which are Data Protection Act compliant. Informed consent was sought from all self-selected participants. A qualitative approach was adopted that included the administration of a Bristol Online Survey³, semi-structured individual interviews, and VSR interviews. The following research questions were addressed:

- How do Chinese ELT students perceive themselves as autonomous learners before and after taking part in the FutureLearn MOOC blended learning project?
- What aspects of the FutureLearn MOOC blended learning project have influenced the Chinese ELT students' perceptions on learner autonomy?
- To what extent do Chinese ELT students' perceptions of learner autonomy align with their actual practices to promote learner autonomy?

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Research question 1

The findings from surveys and semi-structured interviews revealed that all of the four participants were not given opportunities to practise their learner autonomy (i.e. proactive autonomy) when they were studying or teaching in China, instead they practised and fostered reactive autonomy (i.e. a lower level of autonomy), which could be a result of the Asian educational culture they have experienced (Littlewood, 1999). After engaging with the MOOC blended learning project, a sociocultural dimension (Little, 1995) of learner autonomy was mentioned by

3. <https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk>

all of the participants⁴, which is also a characteristic of Eastern learning cultures regarding collectivism (Littlewood, 1999). Furthermore, an independent dimension of learner autonomy (Littlewood, 1999) was highlighted by two of the participants with little teaching experience. However, the data collected from the surveys illustrated that the four participants still had a tendency to believe that teachers are responsible for the learning process⁵. This possibly derives from their traditional teacher-centred educational culture (Chang & Holt, 1994; Wang, 2008). Thus, the findings indicate that these Chinese ELT students experienced “a state of ‘liminality’ within the threshold” (Land, Cousin, Meyer, & Davies, 2005, p. 55). In other words, they were reluctant to relinquish their previous “comfortable positions” (Land et al., 2005, p. 54) and accept the shift in their identity (Orsini-Jones, Conde Gafaro, & Altamimi, 2017, p. 8).

3.2. Research question 2

The participants were asked to reflect on and compare their learning experience on the FutureLearn MOOC and face-to-face lecturers in order to identify the aspects which influenced their beliefs on learner autonomy. Most of the participants stated that the FutureLearn MOOC was beneficial to them⁶. Furthermore, the data collected from individual interviews revealed that activities (e.g. group discussions, meta-reflective practices) carried out in the face-to-face class on the MA facilitated the participants’ understanding of the sociocultural dimension (Little, 1995) of learner autonomy. In addition to this, two participants with little teaching experience emphasised that engaging with the global discussion forums inside the FutureLearn MOOC also strengthened their understanding of learner autonomy regarding the sociocultural dimension. They also mentioned how learning on the MOOC empowered them to take responsibility for their own learning process, as they could choose the steps to take. They viewed the MOOCs in terms of ‘self-access learning’ (Manning, Morrison, & McIlroy, 2014, p. 294) and declared that

4. Statement 13.8 of the survey in Table 1:
<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/izradrzmmu5dd1ia2zueotanhv6f33c8>

5. Statements 12.1-12.4 of the survey in Table 2:
<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/izradrzmmu5dd1ia2zueotanhv6f33c8>

6. Statements 14.1-14.6 of the survey in Tables 3 and 4:
<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/izradrzmmu5dd1ia2zueotanhv6f33c8>

through using it they had come to understand the conceptualisation of learner autonomy. However, the other two participants who were experienced teachers in China believed that it was the teacher's responsibility to select appropriate learning content for students when learning on the MOOC, because they believed that students might not be able to choose an appropriate learning course that benefitted them. Such a belief may root in the traditional teacher-centred educational cultures. For example, "students are used to high levels of personal support and assistance from their teachers, both in class and with assignments" (Cao, 2011, p. 4), because "teachers are considered wise, authority figures whose word has great weight" (McLaren, 1998, in Cao, 2011, p. 7).

3.3. Research question 3

Data collected from the VSR interviews were used to triangulate the results from both the surveys and the semi-structured interviews, and the initial findings suggested that there was a strong connection between the participants' perceptions of learner autonomy and their actual practice in promoting it. However, a gap was identified between some of the participants' theoretical beliefs and their microteaching practice. For instance, the participant with twelve-year teaching experience defined learner autonomy as "the teacher gives students enough freedom in their learning process", and "the students should take control of their learning and they should be leading their learning activities" (Participant 4, survey 18/11/2017). In addition to this, they also held a positive attitude towards fostering learner autonomy as mentioned in their semi-structured interview. However, when the microteaching video was analysed, it became apparent that they were not giving control over to their students in their teaching practice, instead they delivered a very tutor-centred session. Hence, while originally it was believed that they had grasped the concept of autonomy, it became clear that they had now and that they were stuck with the "liminal stage" (Land et al., 2005, p. 55) and instead of displaying understanding they demonstrated 'mimicry'. They could 'recite' the definition of the concept of learner autonomy, but they could not put it into practice. The ontological transformation of their beliefs had not taken place, they had not 'become' a teacher implementing autonomy, despite having stated that they believed they wanted to implement

an autonomous approach. It was interesting to notice that the participants with fewer years of teaching experience were more willing to put their beliefs on learner autonomy in practice in their microteaching session.

4. Conclusion

The results of the current study revealed that integrating a FutureLearn MOOC into an existing MA course could promote the Chinese ELT students' understanding of the threshold concept of learner autonomy, especially for those participants who had little teaching experience. They also illustrated that engaging with an autonomy-supportive environment could foster learner autonomy, even if the learners are from traditional teacher-centred educational cultures. However, more experienced Chinese teachers appeared to be reluctant to embrace autonomy in their practice. For this reason, it is suggested that teacher educators should encourage trainee teachers to reflect on their prior learning or teaching experience and compare it with their current learning experience in order to help them identify any potential gaps that may hinder their understanding of learner autonomy. In addition to this, VSR is a viable technique which could be used to help trainee teachers or teacher educators to reflect on the alignment between their own teaching beliefs and their actual practice.

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